

# Book Review

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Prothero, Stephen. *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World and Why Their Differences Matter*. Melbourne: Black Inc., 2010.

I first heard of this book when the author was interviewed on *The Colbert Report*, an American ‘infotainment’ series that appeals to those under 30. Stephen Prothero is chair of the department of religion at Boston University, and he has appeared, according to the blurb, on numerous US radio and television shows.

His main argument in this book is that, contrary to popular understanding, all religions are not simply “different paths to the same God.” In his introduction, he takes aim particularly at well-known writers on religion like Huston Smith and Karen Armstrong, who exemplify this *pluralist* approach. He says “What we need on this furiously religious planet is a realistic view of where religious rivals clash and where they can cooperate”.<sup>1</sup> His own position is a sort of ‘postmodern pluralist’ one, that sees the different religions as tackling different problems and highlighting different goals. The different religions ask different questions about the human condition and come up with radically different answers.

He uses a ‘simple, four-part approach’ to the religions. Each religion articulates:

A *problem*;

A *solution* to this problem, which serves as the religious goal;

A *technique(s)* for moving from problem to solution; and

An *exemplar(s)* who chart the path from problem to solution (p. 14).

Islam, *the way of submission*, is the first religion he describes. Over one billion people self-identify as Muslims, placing it second only to Christianity in the number of adherents. The question that Islam addresses is the problem of human self-sufficiency, or the *hubris* of trying to act as if you can live without God. The problem is not sin, and the solution is not salvation, but submission to God. The techniques that Islam prescribes are known as the *five pillars of*



<sup>1</sup> Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World and Why Their Differences Matter* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2010), 4.



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*Islam*. This is an architectural analogy where there is a central pillar, the *Shahadah*, or Islamic profession of faith, and four other pillars, which support the corners of the building, *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (charity), *sawm* (fasting), and *hajj* (pilgrimage) (p. 33). The exemplar is Muhammad, whom Prothero rates as the most influential person in history, doing the work of Jesus and Paul combined.

There are extensive quotes from the Quran (which he writes without the apostrophe) and he is not afraid to speak frankly about it:

“One source of my disquiet is the way the Quran twists wrath around compassion so tightly that the former seems to strangle the latter...In short, the Quran reads like a fire-and-brimstone sermon from start to finish.” (p. 46)

He concludes this section by saying that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may have belonged to Christianity, but the twenty-first belongs to Islam. I would argue, however, that in hindsight, the twentieth century actually belonged to Islam, for that was the century where it saw its stunning growth from a seemingly moribund religion to its present status. I would add, that Muslim extremists seem intent on squandering this advantage and smearing the image of Islam, in the same way that the European (read Christian at that time) countries did in the early twentieth century.

Christianity he calls *the way of salvation*. For Christianity, the problem is sin; the solution (or goal) is salvation; the technique for achieving salvation is some combination of faith and good works; and the exemplars are the saints in Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy and ordinary people of faith in Protestantism (p. 14).

He accurately describes Christianity as centred on Jesus Christ, whom Christians traditionally regard as Son of God and Saviour. He argues that the Jesus story operates on three levels, the first being the story of Jesus himself, wandering the dusty roads of Roman Palestine, who was executed on a cross in Jerusalem. Then there are the story of the resurrected Christ who acts in the lives of individual people, and finally the cosmic story, where he is the turning point of history, and will bring history to a close.

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“Today the Bible is the world’s number one bestseller, Jesus is the world’s most recognizable icon, and Christianity is the world’s most popular and widely scattered religion; 2.2 billion people, or a third of the world’s population, call themselves Christians.” (p. 74)

He does not quote extensively from the Bible, but his final quote is from Isaiah 55:8, where God says, “my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways.”

There is not space here to go into this detail for all the religions he describes. I will merely list them: Confucianism, *the way of propriety*,



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Hinduism, *the way of devotion*, Buddhism, *the way of awakening*, Yoruba Religion (from West Africa and its diasporas), *the way of connection*, Judaism, *the way of exile and return*, and Daoism, *the way of flourishing*. He has a brief coda on atheism, *the way of reason*, where he dismisses the ‘angry atheists’ like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, in favour of friendly atheists, who even have a website: <http://friendlyatheist.com/faq/>

Prothero concludes that the task of the great religions is to transform us; in the words of Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” He praises the young people involved in what he calls *Interfaith Dialogue 2.0*, who recognize the real religious boundaries between faiths, and are still engaged in genuine dialogue. He finishes his conclusion with the well-known parable of the blind men and the elephant (p. 338-39). He mentions the many interpretations it has been given, and then provides his own: the parable teaches us that the transcendent is there to humble us, to remind us of the limits of human knowledge: that we cannot know God’s thoughts.